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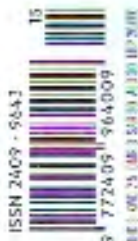
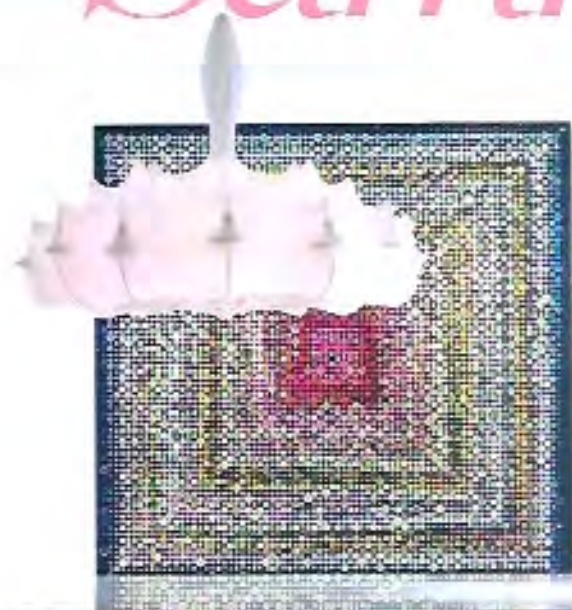
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FOUND IN
TRANSLATION

Tasking herself with the mission of revitalising age-old crafts, designer Nada Debs takes her Japanese-influenced Middle Eastern message worldwide

Words **RANIA HASIB** Photography **EFRAIM EVIDOR**

Pelite with big brown eyes, Nada Debs' physical features are straight out of a Japanese anime, a genre often feted for its celebration of powerful feminine forces. She is dressed in green when we meet, a colour she says that, along with yellow, is growing on her. "I feel my style is becoming more feminine," she says of her latest collection *Now & Zen*, which, incidentally is inspired by the colours of

manga, a style she references only in the most delicate of ways.

The Lebanese-born and Kobe-bred designer has indeed personified the Japanese aesthetic of less-is-more throughout her decade-old practice, crafting organic pieces that infuse ornamental Arabic patterns into minimalist—and always functional creations. Though she now increasingly works on a commission basis, *Now & Zen* sees

"Someone has to preserve our Middle Eastern craft and heritage, and I think that's my calling"



Debs foray into lifestyle design, including bags and scarves in a collection that boasts trays, tables, cushions and lamps. Organic wood is decorated with flowery patterns made with her signature mother-of-pearl; Islamic geometry blends with more natural shapes; bags are made of upcycled textiles; traditional Japanese *obis* and *tatami* are combined with intricate marquetry to create fresh, modern pieces. *AD* finds out more.

Tell us about the *Now & Zen* collection.

It's been over 10 years since I started my practice, and I felt it was time to reinvent myself. I've long been influenced by traditional Japanese lines, but if you go to Japan today, the anime and manga scene is very strong—worldwide too. It's all about fantasy, colours and craziness. This collection is a reaction of sorts to my more rectilinear pieces.

I used antique *obis* (traditional Japanese sash) as a base to create bags and scarves. But *Now & Zen* also contains my craft pieces, except I decided to push myself further. I wanted to infuse colour in my mother-of-pearl inlays, and so I stained them in rainbow hues. I've used traditional marquetry, which is usually a very serious and difficult technique, on my *tatami* trays and tables, lightening up a heritage craft.

You fuse East and East, not West.

Yes. My forefathers went down the silk route, and my own silk route means I grew up in Japan, where I picked up the design aesthetic of simplicity. I then studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, where it's all about the future, modern materials and practicality. I then ventured to the UK, where antiques are revered. I decided to move to the Middle East, where patterns and ornamentation reign supreme. My work is a global reaction to design.

You believe that your practice is a responsibility. Can you elaborate on this?

Arabs have become more global, so how do you keep up to date with everything we have to offer? Someone has to preserve our craft and heritage, and I think that's my calling. My work is mainly a message that is first and foremost to revitalise traditional craft and give it lightness. Though I wasn't always connected to my

Middle Eastern roots, when I moved to Lebanon I was surprised by the layers of depth, heritage and craft that we possess. Preserving this is what makes it all worthwhile for me.

So, your craft is essentially a cultural ambassador from the Middle East to the world.

Every continent looks at my work differently. In the Middle East, it's the satisfaction of an identity. In Europe, it's exotic. Americans find it practical. And the Japanese appreciate the craft and simplicity of it. There is something very spiritual about Japanese design; beauty is how they reveal their higher being, but it's all about paring down. In the Arab world, we repeat patterns over and over in a Sufi-like way to find what we seek. We are all reaching the same place; what intrigues me is how we get there.

1. Nada Debs' signature mother-of-pearl inlay oval tray from the new 2. Bean bags from the *Now & Zen* collection 3. The Land of the Rising Sun cabinet is inspired by the Japanese flag 4. Colour stained mother-of-pearl on tables from the *Now & Zen* collection

LEBANESE-
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